

GOD AND COMMON SENSE
Genesis 1:1-5; Mark 1:14,15
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Sooner or later every child teaches his parents the fundamental dilemma of theology. This is how it goes. "Mommy/Daddy, who made the trees?" Unsuspecting parents answer, always, "God made the trees." Next question: "Daddy, who made the sun?" Again, consummately rational, the parent responds, "God made the sun." "Mommy, who made the sky?" And once again, innocent of the fact that this progressive lesson in logic is about to come apart at the seams, the parent answers, "Why, God made the sky, honey." The coup de grace follows shortly. The child, having learned that God made trees, sun and sky asks a very logical, sequential question: "Who made God?" Parent has very few options. The first, "Ask your Sunday School teacher about that." The second, "Let's go get an ice cream cone." The third, "Who made God? - Nobody", would probably work except for the fact that most adults have not yet learned the lesson and so we go on to alternative four which sounds something like this..."Who made God? Why, God always was. He has no beginning. No one had to make Him. He's always been there." The child is now skeptical. Logic has disappeared. Everything has a beginning and ending. What does it mean that something always was? Sooner or later every child will teach his/her parents the ultimate theological dilemma: we are reasonable creatures, but there is a limit to our reason. We are finite creatures, and we have a devilish time getting our finite minds around the very idea of infinity. The very name "God" represents a staggering philisophic assertion.

It is a particular dilemma for the preacher, who usually doesn't address the issue much. Yet, years ago John Ruskin wrote, "The duty of the clergyman is to remind people, in an eloquent manner of the existence of God." (John Baillie, Our Knowledge of God, p.240). And British theologian, J.S.Whalen, tells the story of a young clergyman who asked the Bishop of Oxford for advice on preaching. The distinguished churchman thought for a moment and said, "Preach about God, and preach about twenty minutes." Whale elaborates, "The Christian preacher has many opportunities but one theme...the reality, nature and purpose of the living God." (Christian Doctrine, p.11).

The concerns of the Christian are many and varied, ranging from contemporary issues in the world to intimate matters of personal peace and well-being. But beneath it all is the singular matter of the existence of God. The Bible does not argue the issue: God is simply assumed. In our lesson this morning I read the primal assumption of the Old Testament; namely, that there is a creator God, and the primal New Testament assumption; namely, that the Kingdom of God, in the man Jesus Christ, began to break into human history.

God is primary to the whole project. Yet, what was once assumed by all, is no longer as real, as firm as it used to be. Atheism, not the Madalyn Murray - verbal type, but what someone called recently the "quiet atheism of the heart" is not uncommon in some people all the time and, I believe, in all people some of the time. The more you think about God, the more opaque He becomes. Pascal was astonished at the boldness with which men propose to speak about God. Leslie Weatherhead suggested that the only way honestly to write about the subject was to leave six blank sheets of paper.

Why bother. then? Why raise a subject very bright people spend a lifetime pursuing? The reason is that it is important: that religion, in its fundamental ambiguity about human logic has often seemed to lack common sense: that in our despair over explaining and understanding everything we have sometimes backed into superstition and stopped trying to understand anything. Ignorance in religion is not very attractive. It is inclined to be closed, superstitious, arrogant. It is inclined to burn books. Ignorance in religion with a little political power is inclined to burn people, as in the Inquisition, or to excommunicate Galileo, or worse. I raise the issue because among

God's most precious gifts to you is a mind; and while religion by its very nature cannot be totally rational, neither can it be irrational. That seems to me to be sin of a special kind.

And so let us begin this presumptuous exercise. A good starting point is the understanding that there can be no "ought" in the matter of belief. John Oman taught that. "Truth," he said, "is not something we agree to reluctantly but something that seizes us and compels our attention." I will never forget the situation in which I began to learn that difficult lesson. As a Divinity School Senior I had to be examined for ordination by my Presbytery. The meeting was in Snow Shoe, Pennsylvania, a very small church in the mountains. I had come by train and car - to Snow Shoe from Chicago and my theological statement to the Presbytery reflected all the erudition which I could squeeze into several pages. It was quite a statement. Presbyteries can be gracious and forgiving and so I passed, but afterward one of the retired members of Presbytery put a fatherly arm around my shoulder, complimented me on my paper and said, "Young man - I've been a minister for forty-five years and you know what I believe in now, more than anything else?" I expected him to say something like "The Second Coming, or Heaven", but what he said was, "More than anything, I believe in integrity." That's what I remember about my ordination examination. I wasn't sure what he meant: I'm still not. But I'm still thinking about it. I think he was telling me that I was trying to believe too much. I think he meant that God doesn't make His love, or grace, or salvation, contingent upon our ability to believe things about Him. I think he meant that God loves even the people who don't believe He exists. I think the retired gentleman wanted the new man to know that "ought" and "believe" never go together.

We have trouble learning that, and along the way we shut out or turn out many of our brothers and sisters. We have a way of becoming defensive and then arrogant in the face of questions, intellectual challenges to our faith. In the recent issue of Outlook, William Phipps wrote, "Most Christians have been afflicted with pietists who conveniently squelch every difficult inquiry by sanctimoniously spouting, 'Who are we to question the word of God?'" I was saddened, frankly, by a paragraph from Charles Darwin's autobiography I discovered this week - Darwin, whose Theory of Evolution is still attacked by some Christians. Darwin wrote that he was "very unwilling to give up his belief in Christianity - but disbelief crept over me at a very slow rate, and was at last complete...I can hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for if so...the men who do not believe - and this includes my father, brother and almost all my best friends - will be everlastingly punished... This is a damnable doctrine." (See Leslie Weatherhead, The Christian Agnostic, p.45). How sad that the conflict between theology and common sense couldn't have been creatively engaged in the church.

Faith in God does not have to be defensive. It certainly does not have to hide from the probing inquiries of human logic. God made the human mind too. Logic is His creation: common sense is one of His better inventions.

There is, I continue to believe, a case to be made for the reasonability of Christian faith; not the ultimate case, to be sure, but a strong and stimulating one nevertheless.

I believe that order and design in the universe leads logically to the conclusion that there is an orderer, a designer. It is an old argument. If you stumbled upon a watch and examined all its springs and cogs and observed how it worked, you would not, on the basis of common sense, conclude that the watch happened as a result of an incredible series of physical accidents. You would conclude, rather, that there was

a watchmaker somewhere. Biologist Edwin Conklin writes, "The probability of life originating from accident is comparable to the probability of the unabridged dictionary resulting from an explosion in the print shop." (Weatherhead, *ibid.* P.87). A bright atheist would have a field day poking holes in it, I suppose, but I continue to conclude that it makes as much common sense to believe in creation by a creator than it does to believe in creation by accident.

I know only a very little about astronomy but simply looking at the stars makes a theist of me, even if I didn't want to be. I love the story of the crusty old Scots Highlander who after a grim sermon on election and predestination and eternal damnation, suggested that his preacher should spend some time studying the stars. "Why?" the minister asked. "Because you've an awful wee God. That's why," the wise Scotsman answered.

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I know that it doesn't prove a thing, but I find very provocative the idea that when you look at the stars, the very best you can do is see light which left its source in November of 1975, because that's how long it takes the light leaving the nearest star, Alpha Centauri, to get here, and that when you find that reliable Pole Star what you are looking at is light which has been traveling at the speed of 186,000 miles per second since the year 1514, "When I look at the heavens, the moon and stars which thou has established...What is man that thou art mindful of him?" It doesn't prove a thing, but I ask that question every time I look.

Religion must not ever be irrational. When an idea or proposition strikes us as illogical, unreasonable we have the responsibility, I believe, at least to examine it very carefully before accepting it. There are, of course, limitations to human reason. Shubert Ogden, who is out on the cutting edge of contemporary theological inquiry acknowledges the validity of the scientific method as the criteria for truth, but argues that it is not logical to conclude that there is no truth outside the scope of the scientific method. A biologist, after all, can explain very precisely what happens when a young man and young woman are together without dealing at all with love. Mathematicians can and have charted the precise progressions in Bach's composition technique without touching the reality of the St. Matthew Passion. There is, very simply, truth that is larger than logic. Someone asked a surgeon's young daughter what her father did for a living. She said, "He gives drugs to people who come to him for help, and when they pass out from the drugs he gets out his knife and cuts them, and then when they finally get better from their cuts he sends them a big bill." That is the truth, of course, but not the whole of the truth.

Faith in God, I believe, is not blind. It is not a matter of shutting off your intellectual capabilities, swallowing hard and accepting what your common sense tells you can't be so. Faith is going with common sense as far as you can: listening to your own intellectual capacities, examining all the evidence and then deciding - then making the commitment which takes you beyond the realm of reason and logic, to the place of deeper truth. You do that, after all, when you contemplate the miracle of another person's love for you. You can't prove it. All you can do is weigh the evidence and then trust. What a shame to miss the experience, however, in the process of trying to prove its reality.

It rests finally, therefore, not on logic but on testimony and all the preacher can do, ultimately, is share his own. I measure mine by whatever common sense I have been given, and sometimes correct it or bring it in line, and sometimes expand it.

I believe the notion of God as intelligence designer, as creator, and lover of His creation makes sense. Creation continues to astound me: from the remarkable capabilities of a single cell to the majesty of a mountain. I am astounded by human birth each time I am close to it. Tertullian, second century church father, said it - and I believe it because it makes sense to me: "I will give you a rose and you

will not doubt God any more." I conclude, quite simply, that it makes more sense to believe in a creator than in coincidence.

I believe because Christianity, frankly, seems to me to make sense, in profound ways, often beyond the perimeters of my initial responses. I know the reality of power in the world. I also know that power as force does not work. It is not, therefore, rational. What works is love, humility, self emptying. We can argue about the details, the implications and ramifications, but the Roman Empire is gone, so is the thousand year Reich; the new Soviet Empire, even our own Nuclear guaranteed muscle - none of it is forever. None of it compels permanence. I believe in the reasonability of God and the Gospel because I know - as you do that it is true - that love is better than hate, kindness is better than cruelty, compassion is better than indifference, equality is better than discrimination, that the exceptions are the aberrations, the sick people. I believe the Christian faith compels the attention of the rational mind because its ethic - its understanding of the human condition, makes sense.

I believe in God because of Jesus Christ. He was, at least, the best we have ever produced. I believe more than that about Him, but He was, at least, the best of us. Not to believe is to conclude that He was wrong, a fraud perhaps, mad perhaps, deluded perhaps, but utterly, dead wrong: that when He said there was a Kingdom coming like yeast in bread, He was wrong; that when He told the story about a father running down the road to meet a wayward son and let His hearers tie that up with God, He was wrong: that when He said, at the hour of death, "Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit," He was talking to nothing.

I believe because, even if I didn't want to, the question keeps asking itself. I can't escape it. I know what Sigmund Freud said about our desire for a father and our capacity to create one, but understanding that doesn't resolve the question. I believe because I have felt what Rudolf Otto called the "Numinous" - the "Wholly Other", what Paul Tillich described as that moment he could accept the fact that he was accepted by something greater than himself; what a philosopher called the "pull of the invisible", and Scotsman George MacDonald called the "scent of unseen roses". I believe because "the mind is alive"; to borrow words of a Frenchman, Henri DeLubac "and so is the living God who makes himself known to it". (Ogden, The Reality of God, Preface).

I have come to believe that the question itself is not evidence of psychological insecurity or neurotic obsession, but the mysterious moving of God. I believe He has created the need within us. "My soul thirsts for thee, my flesh thirsts for thee in a dry and thirsty land," the Psalmist wrote.

I believe because we are restless until we find our rest in Him. That is my testimony, remarkable only because it is mine. I invite you to discover yours: to measure it by your own gift of common sense.

We are inclined to overdo our descriptions, O God, and confine You within our theologies. Come to us; surprise us; startle us with Your Presence; keep us humble and honest, and in the middle of our pilgrimage - find us, in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.